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RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL 0753
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 0254
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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN'S PARLIAMENTARIANS GREET U.S. EDUCATION
DELEGATION WARMLY, OFFER NOTHING

SUMMARY

11. (U) Rounding out its official meetings in Ashgabat, the education delegation led by Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Exchanges Alina Romanowski met on May 3 with Chairmen of three (Mejlis) parliamentary committees:

-- Maral Paltayava - Committee on Economic and Social Issues,

-- Baymyrat Babayev - Committee on Science, Education and Culture, and

-- Gelimyrat Allayev - Committee on Interparliamentary and International Relations.

All alumni of U.S. Government sponsored exchange programs, the Mejlis representatives were cordial and forthright but made clear that they play no role in the policy-making process. End Summary.

REVIEW OF THE DRAFTING PROCESS

12. (U) DAS Romanowski referred to the delegation's meetings with the Deputy Chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers Hydyr Saparlyev and Minister of Education Muhammetgeldi Annaamanov earlier in the day (septel), asking how the Mejlis interacted with the ministerial decision making process.

13. (U) Paltayeva, who dominated the host government side, said that legislation originated in the five-year plan developed by individual incoming Mejlis deputies, but also from presidential and ministry initiatives. Once elected, a deputy sent letters to government institutions within his/her constituency to solicit areas of priority activity during the deputy's term. A deputy either initiated a draft law or received a draft law from regional government bodies, with whom the Mejlis coordinated drafting activity. A draft law was first circulated through one of the parliament's five committees: those represented at the meeting as well as Committees on Liaison with Local Governments (Gengeshi) and that on Human Rights. The draft law then was sent to relevant ministries for comment. The Mejlis later created a working group, often including relevant ministry representatives, to further tailor the draft law, send the law for public comment, then finally to the president for approval.

MEJLIS OPEN TO FOREIGN EXPERTS

14. (U) When possible, deputies referred to international models and consulted with foreign experts, including those from other CIS countries, in creating a draft law. Paltayeva described two cases in which the Mejlis had hosted European legislative experts to assist in the drafting process. Rolf Knipper, President of the International Arbitration Court, visited Turkmenistan in 2005 to assist the Mejlis to draft Turkmenistan's civil code. UNICEF was sponsoring cooperative activity to promote public awareness of the law on the Rights of the Child. (Note: This activity is part of the UN's five-year plan with the host government, for 2005-2009. End Note.) In response to Romanowski's offer of an eventual exchange of parliament members with the United States, Paltayeva said the Parliament of the Republic of Georgia had also offered such an exchange, and that the Mejlis was always open to such contact. Paltayeva noted with pride that she had participated in a recent group exchange to Sweden on education issues, and that she had traveled to the United States in 1994 on a U.S.-sponsored program to examine banking legislation issues. (Note: Paltayeva could not remember what agency sponsored this program. Babayev is an alumnus of a 2002 International Visitors Program on Internet policy. Allayev visited the United States earlier this year on a Department of Justice-sponsored rule of law visit. End Note.)

FOREIGN UNIVERSITIES IN ASHGABAT, INTERNET IN VILLAGES?

15. (U) In the area of educational reform, Romanowski ceded that the Ministry of Education might need time to "clear the way forward" on many of President Berdimuhammedov's proposed reforms, but said that the United States could offer a broad range of assistance in this

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effort. Paltayeva responded that, indeed, "it takes time" to build the framework of proposed reforms, but that the Government of Turkmenistan -- like that of the United States -- placed a very high priority on education. Delegation members asked whether the intention (discussed when Berdimuhammedov met Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow in late April) to establish a branch of Moscow State University in Ashgabat indicated forthcoming acceptance of foreign degrees by the Government of Turkmenistan. Paltayeva said that "of course" the presence of foreign teaching specialists in Turkmenistan would mean an acceptance of foreign degrees; but it was unclear if Paltayeva understood the question correctly. Paltayeva also (incorrectly) suggested that there had been discussions to open branches of U.S. universities, which, like the branch of Moscow State University, would be based in the new International Ruhnama University in Ashgabat. As yet, Paltayeva said, there were no plans for those branches to operate "independently" in Turkmenistan, that is, outside of the Ruhnama University.

16. (U) Babayev highlighted state Internet activities, stating that state Internet cafes were to be opened in each major region and then in each "district and village" of Turkmenistan. (Comment: The wallflowerish Babayev seemed intimidated during the meeting and spoke only briefly, in Turkmen, whereas the confident Paltayeva -- obviously in charge -- spoke in Russian. End Comment.)

VAGUE ON EDUCATION LAW CHANGES

17. (U) Babayev said that existing education legislation was updated shortly after Berdimuhammedov's announcements of reform in January and February; therefore, the current legislative basis for the educational system was adequate for the proposed reforms, but legislation was "a living document" and could be changed should the need arise. Paltayeva did not foresee a case in which the Mejlis or the legislative process might directly influence education policymaking. Asked about the Mejlis' potential influence on development of curriculum and textbooks, Paltayeva said that such influence would only come through when a draft law went through the working group process.

COMMENT

18. (SBU) One purpose of the delegation's meeting was to insure that information about available U.S.-funded support in the education sphere reaches beyond the protective walls of the Ministry of Education and individuals such as Deputy Chairman for Education, Health, Culture and Science Saparlyev, who provides no evidence of being interested in change in the education sector. Post believes that the participating deputies understand well the value of exchanges and of broader access to the Internet. While they may not have direct influence over educational policy, their long-term presence in the decision-making process is another possible pressure point on government policy-making. End Comment.

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